

he gestured at the sky – “flying with the birds. Go on!”

He waved his hands and Boy shook his feathers, spread his wings and heaved himself into the air. Ruig watched as his child dropped out over the edge of the hill, caught the updraft, and rose majestically in a slow spiral, wings stretched, slight adjustments of his tail correcting his course. Again, Ruig was taken with the ease of his son's flight. He breathed out gently, and saw his own expression of wonder on the stranger's face. “What do you want with me?” he said softly, to the man, but there was no reply.

They followed a rough track down the limestone face of the scarp and rested again, halfway down. They sat on a rocky ledge, with the tops of the trees reaching up to almost their level. Ruig thought of eagles, imagined he was perched in an eyrie, surveying his domain.

“Have you considered the possibility that you are the impostor?” said the man, the impostor. His tone was that of a normal conversation, yet his words had the edge of a blade no Ward could deflect. “Have you considered the possibility that I am Alcaj Ruig Tre and that someone has sent you to test me?”

If this man had come to trap him, then he was doing an admirable job. For a moment Ruig was tumbling through space and time and he believed this other Ruig, but then he gathered himself and he saw the playful smile on the man's face and he realized he was being taunted as no ordinary man taunts a Witness. It made him feel, in that instant, as if he was just a normal man again, privy to all the little social exchanges and challenges he had left behind when he had accepted the Ward.

He shouldered his pack and led the way down the rough track and all the time he was reminded – by the scuffed footfalls, the little cascades of dislodged stones – that this man was behind him, watching him.

They passed in silence through the trees, the slope of the land gently leading them down towards the village of Scawltter. The woodland was not as thick here and occasionally Ruig glimpsed Boy soaring, gliding, being mobbed on one occasion by a cloud of chattering finches. Boy somersaulted and lashed out his taloned feet at the birds, to no avail; they only harried him more eagerly. The hostility was a sign of his age, Ruig thought. When he was newly cast, eighteen, nineteen years before, he would never have responded in such a manner. Perhaps he would benefit from recasting – an eagle? a vulture? Maybe all he needed was an adjustment to the aggression and impetuosity of his age. They would discuss it tonight, perhaps.

They came upon a mud road, at the edge of the wood. It took the form of a ridge, dropping away to swampy paddies on either side. Along the rows of rice and tilapia enclosures, little automata floated, tending their crops, their shoals.

“Boy! Hup-hup-hup!”

Signalling his continued strange mood, Boy came at him directly out of the sinking, golden sun. Ruig squinted, held his arm up before him, gasped when suddenly Boy resolved himself as a great haloed silhouette and struck his arm harder than necessary. “Shoulder,” he muttered angrily, and Boy walked along his arm, up to rest against the side of his head

and face. His grip was tight on Ruig's shoulder, but his talons were blunted by the protective influence of the Ward.

His call had attracted the attention of the villagers and as the children came running, the Traveller retreated until he was following Ruig and Boy at a respectful distance.

“What's his name?”

“Can I hold him?”

“What is he?”

Ruig smiled at the familiar questions. “My son,” he said. “Only he can decide who holds him.” He nodded at the adults of the village, as they caught up with their children and admonished them for their forwardness.

For the last third of its distance, the road was barely wide enough to contain the throng around Ruig and Boy. The children still chattered and their elders spoke to Ruig in the standard formalities of greeting. Augmented animals looked intelligently on, perhaps wondering if Boy was one of their own.

Where the paddies ended the road opened out and its surface changed from dry mud to a plasticized matting. The dwellings were of a design typical of this region. Single storeys, one or two with an extra level built onto the flat roofs; walls were off-white, of a similar material to the road surface; windows were glazed and tinted, doorways open and wide. The village had a single telecom mast attached to the machines' warehouse, set a little distance away from the main part of the settlement.

Two houses on the fringe were warped and twisted, the result of a recent fire. Ruig looked at them. He could still see the black scorch marks, the charred remains of their less durable contents. The dwellings were beginning to heal themselves, but it would be several days before they were habitable again.

“The glade has been ours for generations,” said one man, from the village of Scawltter. “My parents took me there as a boy. I know where every fruit bush is, I know all the places that the birds nest, the flowers bloom. The glade is ours.”

They had been arguing since first dark. They were seated on the ground in a woodland glade a short distance from Scawltter, Ruig dressed in his Witness's cloak and hat, trying to cultivate an expression of interest and attentiveness.

Why did they call him for such trivialities, he wondered? But to these people, the villagers of Scawltter and the Paul's Acolytes of Riss, he conceded that ownership of the glade had some deep significance. The Paulian Ecclesiarch wanted it as the site of his new Lodge, but for the Scawltterans it was a challenge to their traditions and heritage, and to their pride. But what did it really matter?

He realized they were looking at him, waiting. “What does the historical record say?” he asked, hoping that they had not already told him. His role was more guide than judge, it was merely to sit, and prompt, and encourage. This dispute was one of long-standing – generations, rather than months, he suspected – but recently it had escalated so that any tragedy, such as the fire at Scawltter, or a recent drowning at Riss, was blamed on the other side. The Witness

but he had the IR image-enhancer from his rifle-sight, and he picked her up again.”

“She went back to the burned-out labs?” said Carmichael, puzzled.

Andrews shook his head. “Cabin in the woods,” he said. “Miles away from the installation – from anything. Guy let her in – Kravitz didn't get a good look at him then, but he hung around for a while. There are at least three people living there. One of them's tall, slim, fair-haired, fiftyish.”

Daniel Franklin was – or had been – tall, slim, fair-haired and fiftyish. So were lots of other people. Carmichael rooted out photographs of Franklin and Abel, and told Andrews to show them to Kravitz while he finished up what he was doing.

He dropped in to see Burke before he left. “You did a good job,” he said. “You didn't conclude anything you weren't able to confirm – I appreciate your caution.”

Burke didn't look pleased; he thought it was just a line, to soften him up. “That's okay,” he said dully.

“About the apes,” said Carmichael. “Your best guess is that there were two corpses, not three?”

“No,” said Burke. “There wasn't enough to justify any kind of educated guess. The remains we found were consonant with the theory that there might have been two non-human primate corpses, which might or might not have been chimpanzees. There were anomalies. I wouldn't swear to the number or the nature, or that the bones we found came from anything that was alive before the fire. I didn't draw any conclusions at all, Dr Carmichael.”

Carmichael nodded. “Too little to go on. Whoever set the fire knew how to make it burn exceedingly hot – anything left could be disinformation. Even Abel's teeth.”

“You think Abel set the fire?” said Burke.

“I don't think anything. I'm on your side – no conclusions, no guesses, no theories. It's the only scrupulous way.”

When Carmichael got back to the hotel, he found Kravitz in a similar sort of mood, unable to confirm or deny that the man he'd seen at the cabin was Daniel Franklin. “Didn't see him clear enough,” he said. “Could have been the guy in the photograph, but it's a lousy picture and I was looking through a night-sight.”

“Do we tell the local cops about the cabin?” Andrews wanted to know.

“Not yet,” said Carmichael. “The people up there sent the girl down to talk to me, avoiding the locals. It's just possible that the local cops are the ones they're hiding out from – and if so, it might be as well to know why before we blow their cover. We'll go up there – just the three of us. Discreetly, after dark. And we'll walk – leave the jeep where it is.”

Andrews shrugged his shoulders. Kravitz, on the other hand, looked distinctly unhappy. He'd already had one sleepless night. Carmichael relented. “Okay,” he said to the soldier. “Just the sergeant and me – provided that you can show us on the map exactly where this cabin is, and how to approach it.”

Thet set off from the hotel at ten; there was no evidence they were being watched or followed. The sergeant wore a sidearm but didn't take a rifle; they both carried night-sights. They didn't

